

The Hole Behind the Building

By Zoe Gabriel

Yesterday was May 3, 2024, and I was in San Diego, California. Today is February 19, 1944, and based on the sign in the distance it looks like I'm in Camp Fossoli in the outskirts of Capri, Italy. The last thing I remember is that I went to bed and felt my stomach hurting, it was beginning to ache, and now I am here. I had gotten home from dance class as normal and then had dinner. I was at dance for 6 hours because we had an extra rehearsal before our last competition and when my stomach started to hurt I just assumed I was overworked. I said good night to my mom like usual and went to bed. Now I'm here. I don't even remember waking up or what happened. I just appeared.

It looks like this camp is filled with innocent prisoners, and from what I know from history, they are mainly Jews. When I learned about this camp I learned that it was the harshest internment camp in Italy during WWII. I wonder if today is the day they are being sent to Auschwitz which is the worst camp of them all.

I'm hiding behind a building. It's not super tall and it's made of brick. I think this is where the prisoners stay, and if that is true I need to find a safer place to hide because the soldiers will be coming in here pretty soon to look for more prisoners. My only view from around the corner is of the Nazis abusing the prisoners. They are screaming harshly at them and a Nazi is beating one prisoner with his bare hands. I don't know how he will be able to stand up after that. They look as fragile as a feather that they won't survive a day longer. I can't be caught, I need to go home, but I can't just sit here and watch, I need to help these helpless prisoners. I

know that Auschwitz is a camp for extermination and that these prisoners are about to get put on a train, get sent there, and if they make it through the journey, have their lives taken away. I also remember something about there being a whole other group of prisoners sent away in 3 days. The Nazis are emptying this camp because as of 5 months ago, Italy is now part of the Allies so they need to move all the prisoners somewhere else. Although the Allies won this war, right now it doesn't look too promising.

"Pssstttt," I hear a noise and I turn around and see a little boy trying to get my attention. He looks about 10 years old, old enough to be aware of the discrimination happening to him, but too young to understand what it's all about. He's very thin and has a shaved head making him look like the rest of the prisoners. "The Nazis are gathering everyone up right now. You might want to go before they take you and you know." He was speaking in Italian but luckily I can understand him because I speak Spanish and they are very similar. The boy was referencing the execution. He was too scared to even realize I wasn't dressed like him and looked free because I didn't even have their uniform on.

"Don't worry I'm here to help-" The boy pointed around the corner. The Nazis were coming to gather the prisoners in this area.

Before I even had time to think the boy grabbed my arm, "I have a spot we can go." With unexpected strength, he pulled me and we ran through the camp. We had to move quickly so that no one saw us but from what I did catch I knew there was a section for women and children, men, and even Jews. It had rows of buildings and space in between each one. I think there were factories on the other side of the camp but I couldn't tell for sure. "We are almost there," the boy told me. I nodded and kept running. The boy pointed to the floor. All I saw was a pile of bricks that looked like all the others.

I looked at him confused, “What?” He moved all the bricks. It was a hole in the ground. This frail little boy dug a hole on the side of a building and covered it with bricks to blend in with the other fallen bricks! You could walk on top of it and still not feel the hole underneath. The hole was big enough to fit an adult and a kid, but because everyone here was so thin, it could probably fit two adults from the camp.

“Go,” he said, pointing to the hole. I stepped inside but right as he was going to climb in there was a shout coming from the other building. A Nazi was coming. I tried to get the little boy to climb in but it was too late, they already saw him. I felt him kick the bricks back on top of me and the Nazi started to yell at him.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING OVER HERE,” yelled the Nazi from above. I could feel the fear in the little boy's soul and I wanted to help, but if this Nazi found out about the hole, I don't think I would ever see the boy again. “You are to be over here in 2 minutes and be ready to get on that train,” the Nazi walked back into the building and I climbed back out of the hole. There was nothing I could do to save him now, but I wanted to do something to help. I pulled out some socks from my bag and a filtered water bottle.

“Here, I hope this helps. It's not much but these socks can keep you warm and hide this in your shirt. If you see any water or have a liquid, put it through the filter and you'll be able to drink it,” the boy listened and nodded. “But, you have to make sure no one sees it,” I made sure he knew this because I didn't want him to get an even worse punishment.

“Thank you,” the boy smiled. He probably hasn't had water in a while and you could tell how lucky he felt. “But I need to go now.”

“Wait, eat this bread roll real quick, before they come and look for you.” He shoved the bread in his mouth and I could tell that wasn't enough. It was too late though he had to go.

The boy started to walk away but I stopped him real quick, “Wait!” you never told me your name.

He looked back at me, “Alberto, call me Al”

I smiled at him, “I hope to see you soon Al,” I told him although I knew deep down, that might not be true. I watched him hurry over to the building because he did not want to get in trouble. He walked in and I saw the arm of a Nazi grab him.

I was never going to unsee this.

This little boy who just saved my life while he was being taken. I climbed back into the hole because I needed to stay hidden and not get caught.

I sat down and I oddly got that sick feeling that I had before I got here. I thought for a second and then I realized that this was the reason I came here in the first place, it was probably this sick feeling. I wanted to go home even though I knew how much help was needed around here. But I couldn't control going home or coming here so I tried to close my eyes and see if it worked. I opened them, nothing happened. I closed them again. Three minutes went by and still nothing. Then I decided to try one more time...

“AH,” I gasped and I was back in my bed. That’s weird the music was still on, the music I listened to, to fall asleep. This means I was gone for less than ten minutes. How is this possible I thought, this must have been a dream?! I looked around, I was in my room, it had worked, but it wasn’t a dream. I had the shoes on that I was wearing in the camp and the dirt from the hole was all over my body.

I had no idea what to do, I didn’t know if I should tell my mom, I didn’t know anything. How was this even possible? I was so tired though and before I had time to think anymore I fell asleep.

I woke up and luckily it was Saturday so I didn't have anywhere to be. I went to the bathroom, but instead threw up. I felt much better and hoped that meant whatever this sickness or magic was, it was gone. Before I talked to anyone or figured out what happened, I decided to sit on the couch and just watch television. I could deal with this later. Right as I sat down and turned on my show I had the feeling again. There is no way I thought. My mom was at her desk doing work and I needed her to know and see what was happening so she would believe me.

“MO-” I tried to scream at my mom but I couldn't. My yell had never left my mouth.

It was too late. I was already back. In this hole built by Al. How was this even possible? Nothing made any sense. I heard a scream from above the hole.

“They are sending us away!” Someone screamed.

“I thought 2 days ago was the only day! I thought we were safe!” The voice sounded like a little kid.

This meant that a whole other day had passed since I'd been here yet it had only felt like one night. I was so confused. There was nothing I could do about now so I decided I might as well help out some of the prisoners while I was here.

If it had been 2 days this must mean that it's February 22, 1944. This is the other day that the prisoners are being sent to Auschwitz. This means that the Nazis are probably gathering up the rest of the prisoners and loading them up on the train. I need to find out where the train is and go help the prisoners.

I gently moved over a brick from above me and peeked through to make sure no one was around. The coast was clear. I climbed out and thought about where the train could be. I tried to remember where everything was from when me and Al ran to hiding. Then it came to me, when I

had first arrived around the corner of a building I had heard the train right by the entrance of the camp. That must be where the train is.

I didn't have much time so I just sprinted around the back of the camp making sure to stay close to the walls and there it was, a brown, old-looking, wooden train. Based on the size it seemed like everyone was going to be crammed on that train for around 20 hours. It also had no seats; it was just cold, old wood. There were already people on it so I went around the back of the train to try to get on. The wooden walls of the train were screwed onto the base of the train to stay up. I used my screwdriver to unscrew the wall and I sneaked one of the boxes. It looked like 2 moms and 5 young kids. When I learned about these trains I knew that each box car carried %200 capacity so there were probably going to be 50 other prisoners joining these two families and I better be quick otherwise a Nazi will see me.

I approached them, "hey," I said gently. The women looked scared. Like I was going to hurt them. "It's ok, I'm here to help," I reassured them. I looked down, one of the kids was bleeding. She had a huge cut on her leg, "Look," I reached out of my bag and grabbed my first aid kit. I cleaned the cut with a wet towel, added some ointment, and put on a bandage. I made sure the bandage wasn't visible so that they didn't get caught.

The two women stared at me. Once I showed them I was just here to help, they spoke to me. "They are sending us to that horrible camp."

"Auschwitz, I know," I told the women. "You look cold, here," I reached in my bag and pulled out 7 pairs of socks. "Put these on, no one will see them and they will keep you warm."

"Thank you," said the other woman. "I don't know how I could ever repay you." She passed the socks to all the children.

“There’s no repaying to do,” These people have been used for so long that they don’t even know their needs anymore. “Here are some filtered water bottles that you guys can share,” I handed them the bottles, “and here are some canned foods that won’t go bad, you can hide them in your pants and eat them whenever you need.”

One of the little kids looked up at me. I think I saw tears in her eyes. “Are you Moses?”

“No honey, she’s better than Moses,” the woman told her daughter.

I wanted to stay and help them but I knew more people needed help. “I wish you guys the best of luck, I need to go help the others.”

“Thank you so much,” said the other woman.

I left out the wall I unscrewed and right before I screwed it back on, I looked through the crack and saw the little kids wave at me. I waved back and shut the wall. I moved onto the next box and this one had a window on the back so I just climbed in.

“Hey!” yelled one of the guys in there.

“Shhhh,” I told him. “I’m here to help. Look,” I showed them what was inside my bag. They realized I was an ally and everyone else in the box just got quiet and looked at me. This box was filled and had around 40 men in it so it was cramped. They were all so skinny, dirty, and bald. I could not imagine how hard this must be for them. It was hard to look at, and all this because they were Jewish or part of some minority.

“Thank god, will you be able to get us out of here,” These men had so much hope.

“I don’t think I can, I wish I could, but I can help keep you alive a little longer,” these men aren’t dumb and knew what was happening to them but would accept any help they could get. “Here are some bread rolls. You can hide them in your hats.”

“Is this even real,” yelled a guy.

“Thank you,” yelled another one.

“You’re welcome,” I responded. I also handed out some socks and filtered water bottles that I quickly taught them how to use and also showed them the instructions on the bottle that were written in Italian. I looked next to me and saw one guy almost all green who did not look well. “What’s wrong with him?” I asked everyone.

“We don’t know, I’ve been trying to give him the food I get, but he isn’t getting better,” said one of the guys from the back.

“Here,” I pulled out some antibiotics and fed them to the man. “You should start to feel better in about 30 min. In the meanwhile, someone keep an eye on him and give him some of the water,” I told the other men.

“Ok.” Some of them went to sit next to him and I gave the last of my canned food to the men.

“Out of all the prisoners, you guys are used the most by the Nazis. You can’t let them find out about this otherwise you may never see light again. If you don’t know already, Italy is part of the Allies now and you guys are being sent to Auschwitz. That camp will be liberated by the Soviets next January so you must keep hope and count down the days. Share these supplies and be smart about them,” I told all of them.

“But how do you know?” someone asked.

“I know it’s hard to believe but trust me I know.”

“I believe her, it’s our only hope, our only answer,” said another one.

“Ok then,” the guy responded.

“The train is leaving. I must go. Best of luck.”

“Thank you, you don’t know how much you just saved our lives.”

I smiled at them and jumped back out the window. I hoped the sick guy would feel better soon and I hoped they survived the war. I knew the outcome of the war but from seeing all this, it was hard to imagine these people would be ok. The train was leaving soon so before I got caught standing here I needed to head back to the hole that Al built. Hopefully I would get that sick feeling again and head home, but I couldn't control it if that were to ever happen.

There were many Nazis and guards so I needed to be strategic. I ran to the front of the train where there were no boxcars and crawled underneath. Then I took my chances and made a run for it hoping there would be no Nazis in the camp still because everyone was on the train.

I was wrong.

I ran through the rows of buildings and turned the corner, and then I knew it was over. I tried to turn around and run away somewhere else but the Nazi had already seen me.

He grabbed my arm. "WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE. WHO ARE YOU. SHOW ME YOUR PAPERS!" He gave me no time to answer and I just stood there quaking. If this man found out what I had done, if I was Jewish, I don't know if I would ever make it home.

But then, I got that feeling in my stomach again, the sick one. The Nazi hit me on my back with a stick. I felt the sharp pain on my lower back and I knew this would leave a mark. He let go of me and grabbed my arms. He then dragged me to the train. All I was thinking was, when am I going to go back, when am I going to go back? I shut my eyes, I didn't want to look at the Nazi or whatever else was about to happen to me.

"Zoe! Zoe!" my mom was shouting at me. I opened my eyes. I was back on the couch, watching TV.